



Representing, resisting and reproducing ethnic nationalism:
Official UK Labour Party representations of 'multicultural Britain'

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An extended version of paper to be presented in symposium:

Representations 'of' us? Or representations 'for' us?
Resisting racialisation in the media
(Coordinated by Caroline Howarth)

VIII International Conference on Social Representations, Rome, August 30, 2006

Summary

In this paper I argue that any attempt to resist racialization needs to take account of the complex and often paradoxical ways in which notions of race and culture come to be articulated in conjunction with categories of nation, state and society. In the first half of the paper I consider some of the strategies used by UK Labour Party Ministers to counter ethnic representations of British identity by promoting the fact and value of post-Imperial Britain as a ‘multicultural society’. In the second half of the paper I consider some tensions within these arguments. First, I consider how the rhetorical formulations that the speakers use to justify the political project of UK multiculturalism implicitly presuppose a natural order in which nations are populated by a racially and culturally homogenous people. Second, I consider how their prescriptive recommendations that ‘we’ recognize and celebrate ‘our’ ethnic diversity do not in practice seek to establish the ultimate fiction of ethnic nationalism as a general ideological principle, but rather treat the fact and value of ethnic diversity as a uniquely British asset or virtue, in a manner that closely echoes the self-celebratory rhetoric of British imperialism. Despite the claim that an ethnically neutral understanding of ‘British society’ will necessarily also entail a rejection of ‘insular nationalism’, paradoxically these banally nationalized liberal utopian discourses of multiculturalism are in some respects more Anglocentric and less internationalist than the explicitly racialized versions of British identity promoted by the far right British National Party.

Introduction

In this paper I shall be focussing on mediated communications that have been designed specifically to resist representations of society and citizenship in racialized or culturally exclusive terms. My general concern is to point to the complex, and sometimes paradoxical, aspects of social representations. In particular, I wish to emphasise that contradictions and ironies are not conveniently confined to forms of representation that we, as academics or as everyday social actors with a radical political consciousness, might view as morally or rationally deficient. Rather, the dilemmatic property of social imagery represents a more generic phenomenon, and as such may be identified in anti-racist as well as within racist arguments. The general substantive point to which I draw attention pertains to the ways in utopian visions of an ethnically plural social and political sphere can often inadvertently adopt an implicitly nationally-circumscribed understanding of who 'we' are, and of who 'we' are ultimately 'for'.

National meta-representations: 'Ethnic' versus 'civic' formulations

In his seminal monograph, *Imagined Communities*, Anderson (1983/1991) famously distinguished the construct of nation, which he described as a system of 'positively-valued inclusion', from the construct of race, which he described as a system of 'negatively-valued exclusion'. However, other commentators have considered the distinction between the constructs of race, culture and nation to be far less clear-cut, and have sought instead to detail the ways in which representations of societies and polities come to be, to adopt Gilroy's (1987 p. 56) phrase, 'saturated with racial connotations'. Such concerns have not been confined to the reified

universe of academic debate. Rather, Anderson's (1991 p. 3) characterisation of nation-ness as 'the most universally legitimate value in the political life of our time' arguably underestimated the extent to which social actors may routinely struggle to reconcile the legitimacy of nationalism against the spectres of racism, xenophobia and ethnocentrism (Condor, 2000). In this paper I consider the ways in which UK Labour Party ministers attend to the moral accountability (cf. Jayyusi, 1984) of the construct of 'British society' in relation to the distinction between 'ethnic' and 'civic' forms of nationalism.

Although the distinction between ethnic and civic constructions of national identity or citizenship¹ is widely invoked in meta-representational discourse, in practice there exists no consensus concerning what, in fact, constitute the defining features of either of the key terms (Eriksen, 1993; Thomas, 1999). For example, within the frame of reference of 'assimilationist' models of citizenship (of which public discourses in France are often taken to represent an exemplary case, see Bryant, 1997; Favell, 1998) the term 'civic' tends to be treated as synonymous with 'cultural' and the construct of 'ethnic' nationalism is understood to refer to the application of ancestral (racial or genetic) criteria to determine citizenship. In contrast, 'multiculturalist' models (often seen to be exemplified by the official public philosophy of the UK) typically understand 'civic' nationalism to refer to situations in which citizenship is *not* contingent upon the adoption of any particular cultural practices. In this case, the construct 'ethnic' nationalism is understood to include

¹ Although the blanket term 'national' is often applied to representations of polities and societies, in fact it is relatively unusual for the boundaries of nations, states and civil societies to coincide (Walby, 2003). In the UK context, the use of the terms 'nationality', 'national identity' and 'nationalism' are especially problematic, since the British state in fact constitutes a multi-national polity (McCrone & Kiely, 2000). However, in the interests of simplicity of presentation, I shall refer to representations of Britain and Britishness as 'national' when no alternative term is readily available (e.g. 'nationalism', 'nationalization') or when a commentator to whom I am referring adopts this formulation.

situations in which citizenship status is contingent upon the adoption of the cultural practices of the 'host' society (Kymlicka, 1995; cf. Alexander, 2002; Barker, 1981)².

However defined, it is common for commentators to treat different constructions of citizenship as 'rival' versions (Máiz, 2003). This kind of presumption has led to forms of empirical research that attempt to classify both state bureaucracies and individual citizens in terms of their endorsement of particular criteria for the ascription of national identity or citizenship. A recent example from the UK may be found in Tilley, Exley & Heath's (2004) analysis of responses to the British Social Attitudes Survey with a view to measuring the extent to which individual respondents endorse civic or ethnic criteria for 'being British'. An alternative kind of research strategy, exemplified in research by Kiely, Bechhofer and McCrone (2005), eschews the ambiguous labels, 'ethnic' or 'civic', but focuses instead on the ways in which social actors ascribe nationality to self and to others on the basis of criteria of birth, ancestry or commitment to country.

In this paper, I shall argue that the procedure of classifying representations of nationality or citizenship into distinct types runs the risk of underestimating the complexities (cf. Bergman, 1999) and the dilemmatic properties (Billig, 1988; Billig, 1993; Billig et al., 1997; Markova, 2000; Moloney & Walker, 2002) of social and political representation. In the following pages I present a case study of political arguments in favour of multicultural constructions of 'British identity', illustrating how a social representations perspective may draw attention to ambivalences within mediated images of the societal status quo and utopian visions concerning future

² Although it has become conventional to automatically equate the construct of 'ethnic' nationalism with 'exclusiveness', this formulation is also open to debate. In particular, we may note that Morris (1996) argued that 'cultures of descent' have the potential to be inherently pluralistic in so far as membership does not depend on the acceptance on the part of an individual of a common set of practices or institutions but is 'vouchsafed by ancestry alone'.

possibilities (Moloney, Hall & Walker, 2005; Moscovici, 1988). The position I shall be adopting can be best summarised by a quotation from Rose, Efrain, Gervais, Joffe, Jovchelovitch & Morant (1995, p. 4):

‘Against notions of monolithic and homogenous representations, we propose the idea of a representational field, susceptible to contradiction, fragmentation, negotiation and debate. In such a representational field, there is incoherence, tension and ambivalence. Yet, permeating all these disparate elements there is a consensual reality, which forms the common ground of historically shared meanings within which people discuss and negotiate’.

Specifically, I shall consider how publicised political speeches in favour of non-racialized, multicultural constructions of British society and identity contain within them elements of incoherence, tension and ambivalence, which are traceable to the fact that the speakers formulate their arguments within a taken for granted frame of reference which Billig (1995) has termed ‘banal nationalism’. This involves the unquestioned, common-sense presumption that that the proper unit for social concern and moral accountability – whether economic, legal or ethical – involves the nation or state; that nations and states exist in essentially competitive relationships with each other, and that nations are normally populated by an original folk who possess a common racial heritage and a distinctive set of cultural practices.

British identity as an essentially contested construct

In *Banal Nationalism*, Billig (1995) argued that appeals to British identity apparent in media and political rhetoric illustrated the status of British society as ‘a topos beyond argumentation’. However, whilst some commentators may on occasion *represent* the British population as endorsing a consensual ‘public opinion’ with

respect to this issue (cf. Bourdieu, 1971/93), in practice the meaning and legitimacy of the category 'British' has always constituted the subject of social and political contestation (Cohen, 1994; Samuel, 1998). Rather than constituting an unambiguous category of discourse, the term 'British' might rather be understood to constitute what Gallie (1956) has termed an 'essentially contested construct', characterised by irresolvable disputes about its proper use, which are not settled by 'appeal to empirical evidence, linguistic usage, or the canons of logic alone' (Gray 1977, p. 344).

Contemporary cultural theorists regularly distinguish two competing versions of British identity, reflecting the distinction between ethno-cultural and civic representations of societies and polities discussed above:

One is Anglo-centric, frequently conservative, backward-looking, and increasingly located in a frozen and largely stereotyped idea of the national culture. The other is ex-centric, open-ended, and multi—ethnic. (Chambers, 1989 p. 94).

Explicit public and media debates concerning the nature of British identity surface in the context of a range of political issues, including matters relating to UK constitutional change and to EU integration. However, some of the most common arguments concern the construction of British identity and society in relation to immigration, race relations and multiculturalism (e.g. Alibhai Brown, 2000; Parekh 2000a;b, see Condor, Gibson & Abell, 2006; Fortier, 2005). These popular debates are, in turn, regularly responded to by government ministers who promote a preferred form of societal representation. It is common on the part of the liberal left to attribute ethno-racial understandings of British society to supporters of the Conservative party (see the quotation for Chambers above for an example). However, although both

individual ministers and the main political parties may adopt distinctive positions concerning race, immigration and (multi)culture, there nevertheless exists what Favell (1998) has termed a general ‘consensual logic’ (p. 103) on the part of the UK political establishment against explicitly racial or cultural definitions of British identity and citizenship. More generally, a normative value of multiculturalism may be understood as ‘consensual’ in so far as it is recognized, if not always personally endorsed, by members of the general public (cf. Devine & Elliot, 1995).

Some widely-publicized political pronouncements concerning the ways in which Britishness should be understood in relation to matters of race, faith and culture have been formulated in response to an immediate ‘crisis’ such as the ‘race riots’ (a series of civil disturbances between young men of white and Pakistani/Bangladeshi ethnic heritage) in the summer of 2001, and more recently, the London bombings of 2005. For present purposes, however, I shall focus on more routine forms of political rhetoric. The objective is to show how, even in apparently straightforward cases, appeals to the fact and value of Britain as a ‘multicultural society’ may in practice be characterised by contradictions, ironies and paradoxes.

The data

For illustrative purposes I shall be considering two political speeches delivered by UK Labour Party ministers in the first quarter of 2001. The first speech was delivered in February by Keith Vaz, an Indian-born MP, who was at the time was FCO Minister of State. This speech was entitled, ‘*Citizenship, identity and ethnicity in Britain and Europe*’, and was presented at the Diplomatic Academy, Vienna. The second speech was delivered two months later by Robin Cook, a Scottish Labour MP representing the seat of Livingston, who was at the time Foreign Secretary. This

speech, entitled '*British Identity*', was presented to the Centre for the Open Society in London. These two speeches were targeted at different audiences and consequently focussed on rather different issues. However, the ways in which the speakers constructed arguments against ethnic, and in favour of multicultural, representations of British society and citizenship shared many features in common, and for present purposes we may deal with them together without any significant loss of information.

Representing ethno-cultural constructions of British society

The first thing to note is that (*pace* Billig) in neither of these speeches did Vaz or Cook presuppose that the constructs of British society and British identity represented *topoi* beyond argumentation. On the contrary, both speakers adopted a polemical (cf. Moscovici, 1988) stance, defining their own (and by extension their party's and the government's) commitment to multiculturalism precisely in opposition to alternative available constructions of British identity. In so doing, both speakers invoked the kind of representational scheme used by Chambers in the quotation presented on page 6. Mono-cultural understandings of British identity were construed as one component of an ideological cluster that also included racism, Anglocentrism, xenophobia, Imperialism and political opposition to the EU. In contrast, multicultural understandings of British identity were treated as a component of a cluster of values that also included anti-racism, internationalism and support for the EU. This form of representational clustering allowed the speakers to attribute opposition to a range of

current government policies – including immigration, multiculturalism, devolution and EU integration - to a single underlying motive: ‘insular nationalism’³.

Ethno-cultural constructions of British identity as a form of personal attitude

In the course of their speeches, both Vaz and Cook invoked images of a public sphere inhabited by individuals who currently endorse different points of view concerning the value of multiculturalism. For example, Vaz contrasted his own (and the ‘*British Government’s*’) preferred version with the views of ‘*some*’ people:

Extract 1

KV 1 On the issue of identity, there has been quite a bit of debate in Britain
 2 about just what it means to be British. It is clear that the term embraces
 3 different things for different people. For some, it is a narrow term
 4 suggesting white, English and Empire – thus excluding millions of British
 5 citizens. For others, it conveys a much wider range of images reflecting
 6 the whole of our society...

Billig (1989) has identified two different ways in which individuals may be understood to ‘hold a view’. The first, which he terms the ‘multi-subjective’ position, treats an individual’s (or group’s) views as expressions of differing, and possibly idiosyncratic, subjective positions. The second form of representation, which Billig terms ‘intersubjectivity’, presents ‘views’ as pertaining to a singular, and ultimately discernable empirical reality, such that agreement amongst perceivers is both possible and ideally desirable.

In the case of the stretch of talk presented in extract 1, we may note that although Vaz apparently displays an even-handed approach to differences of opinion concerning ‘*what it means to be British*’, at the outset of his speech he made it clear that the multicultural position did not simply represent one point of view amongst

³ Note how this formulation implicitly elides the possibility of the EU being resisted on any grounds other than narrow-minded national parochialism, such as political opposition to capitalism, or commitment to cosmopolitanism (cf. Condor, Gibson & Abell, 2006; Reicher, 1997).

many, but rather represented the only position which adequately reflected the objective facts of contemporary social reality:

Extract 2

KV 1 The first point I would like to get across is that Britain is without
 2 doubt a multicultural society.

Robin Cook similarly referred to a non-specific '*some people*' who assume '*the homogeneity of British identity ... to be the norm*' (see extract 9, line 2, below), but presented the multicultural alternative as a project that the British people need to '*come to terms with*', not simply because it more accurately reflected the nature of British society, but also for pragmatic reasons:

Extract 3

RC 1 Coming to terms with multiculturalism as a positive force for our
 2 economy and society will have significant implications for our
 3 understanding of Britishness

The construction of multi- versus mono-cultural constructions of British identity as essentially different points of view may also be seen to bear upon two divergent conceptions of 'public opinion' (see Condor & Gibson, in press). On the one hand, the emotional force and partiality of 'mere' public opinion may be contrasted with cool rationality of expertise. In this case, public opinion may be treated as an object of governance: a position which Cook and Vaz implicitly adopted when they presented pragmatic arguments in favour of the public 'coming to terms with' multiculturalism. On the other hand, public opinion may be treated as mandate for political action. Writing during the second world war, the pioneers of modern opinion polling techniques Gallop and Rae (1940) suggested that an approach which treated the public as the ultimate authority represented the key features of democratic governance: 'the thesis that the people ... must be led by ... legislators and the

experts ... differs only in degree, and not in essence, from the view urged by Mussolini and Hitler that the people are mere “ballot cattle”...’ (p. 259).

In so far as Vaz and Cook acknowledged that policies of multiculturalism would not necessarily be endorsed by all members of the British public, this necessarily raised questions of democratic accountability. Consequently, at the same time as they acknowledged that ‘some’ members of the British population would not agree with their support for multiculturalism, Vaz and Cook also sought to establish the *potential* for its widespread endorsement by presenting the acceptance of cultural pluralism as essentially compatible with shared British ‘ideals’ and ‘values’:

Extract 4

KV 1 underpinning the word [British] must be a shared understanding
 2 of core British values such as respect for human rights, tolerance,
 3 fair play, creativity and an outward approach to the world. This is
 4 essential to maintain a cohesive and stable society. In general there
 5 are few conflicts between sharing these values and accepting cultural
 6 differences.

With respect to my earlier comment concerning the ways in which Vaz and Cook represented ethno-cultural understandings of British society as part of a set of attitudes which also included insular nationalism, we may note how, in extract 4, Vaz presents these ‘*core British values*’ (line 2) not only as compatible with the acceptance of the fact and value of domestic ‘*cultural differences*’ (lines 5-6), but also as synonymous with ‘*an outward approach to the world*’ (line 3).

In extract 5, Robin Cook employs a slightly different form of argument, in which unspecified shared ‘*British values*’ (line 1) are treated as causal factors behind the existence of Britain as a ‘*successful multi-ethnic society*’ (line 2):

Extract 5

RC 1 We should be proud that those British values have made Britain
 2 a successful multi-ethnic society. We should welcome that
 3 pluralism as a unique asset for Britain in a modern world where
 4 our prosperity, our security and our influence depend on the health
 5 of our relations with other peoples around the globe.

Once again we can see how ‘British values’ are associated not only with the endorsement of multiculturalism in the domestic arena, but also with a concern over, *‘our relations with other peoples around the globe’* (line 5).

Ethno-cultural constructions of British society as historical anachronism

A good deal of work in the social representations tradition has considered the role of historiography in national representation (Condor, 1997a; Condor and Abell, 2006; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Liu, Lawrence, Ward & Abraham, 2002; Liu, Wilson, McClure & Higgins, 1999; Soares & Jesuino, 2004). One recent study has drawn attention to the ways in which ordinary social actors in England may be inclined to evaluate their country using historical (then-now) as opposed to explicitly international (us-them) comparisons (Condor, in press, see Brown & Haeger, 1999 for an account of the distinction between temporal and international comparison processes). In the political speeches considered here, both of the speakers used a trope commonly employed by Condor’s (in press) lay respondents, in which the fact of polyculture and the value of multiculturalism are represented as contemporary and progressive, whereas the nation-past is understood to have been characterized by a condition of cultural homogeneity (see Samuel, 1989 for a critique).

In the course of promoting multicultural understandings of British identity, Vaz argued that this form of representation more accurately reflects contemporary, post-imperial, political realities than alternative more exclusive formulations:

Extract 6

KV	1	the term ‘British’ is not a static one but one that has to take
	2	account of the changes in our society over the last thirty years,
	3	including devolution, globalisation, the end of Empire and
	4	Britain’s much closer involvement in Europe. It needs to include
	5	all our citizens.

Robin Cook similarly treated ethno-cultural constructions as antithetical to a '*modern notion of national identity*':

Extract 7

RC 1 The modern notion of national identity cannot be based on race and
2 ethnicity, but must be based on shared ideals and aspirations. Some
3 of the most successful countries in the modern world, such as the United
4 States and Canada, are immigrant societies. Their experience shows
5 how cultural diversity, allied to a shared concept of equal citizenship, can
6 be a source of enormous strength.

At the same time, however, Cook also argued that representations of an indigenous British race or culture had never, in fact, been valid:

Extract 8

RC 1 The idea that Britain was a 'pure' Anglo-Saxon society before the arrival of
2 communities from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa is fantasy. But if
3 this view of British identity is false to our past, it is false to our future too.
4 The global era has produced population movements of a breadth and
5 richness without parallel in history.

Towards the end of his speech, Cook attempted to manage this potential contradiction by arguing that mono-cultural representations of Britishness had only been valid '*from the Victorian era of imperial expansion to the aftermath of the Second World War*' (extract 9, lines 3-4), a period which he effectively bracketed from the longue duree of British history by treating this as an 'extraordinary' moment⁴:

Extract 9

RC 1 In our thousand years of history, the homogeneity of British
2 identity that some people assume to be the norm was confined to a
3 relatively brief period. It lasted from the Victorian era of imperial
4 expansion to the aftermath of the Second World War and depended
5 on the unifying force of those two extraordinary experiences. The
6 diversity of modern Britain expressed through devolution and
7 multiculturalism is more consistent with the historical experience
8 of our islands.

⁴ For present purposes I am largely bracketing consideration of the provenance of the individual speakers. However, it is interesting to note that this kind of historical periodisation, whereby the age of empire and the second world war are separated off from the otherwise ongoing flow of history tends to be more common among speakers from Scotland than England (Condor & Abell, 2006).

In addition to presenting anti-racism and multiculturalism as a political projects which had been rendered timely and expedient by historically novel processes and events, or which was consistent with the unfolding trajectory of British history, both Vaz and Cook also presented ethnic diversity as an extant and prospective future accomplishment of Labour government policies. Vaz, who was addressing a conference on citizenship, emphasized how the active protection and promotion of cultural and racial diversity represented a form of moral imperative, driven primarily over concerns of social justice and citizen welfare:

Extract 10

KV 1 The British Government's policies on multiculturalism are clear. We
 2 see strength and enrichment in diversity. And we believe that one
 3 of the greatest responsibilities we have is to try to make Britain a
 4 fairer place; a place where people of every race and religion feel
 5 themselves to be an equal part of the whole; a society which
 6 makes a celebration out of the fact that we are multi-cultural,
 7 multi-religious and multi-racial; one which not just assimilates
 8 people but celebrates people's differences.

Cook, who was addressing a group of business people, presented the multicultural project as dictated less by moral and civic concerns as by economic and military imperatives, '*our prosperity, our security and our influence*' (extract 5, lines 4 and 5) (cf. Hay & Rosamond, 2002).

Resisting ethno-cultural representations of British society

One especially notable feature of the two speeches considered here is the absence of appeals to any substantive notion of British culture. Although both speakers referred to a shared British 'society' or 'values', precisely what these might consist of was never made clear. Neither of the speakers alluded to a shared British character (cf. Chambers, 1989). Although analyses of political and media discourse

have treated appeals to national ‘character’ and ‘identity’ as functionally equivalent (e.g. Billig, 1995; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001), it is notable that in these particular speeches the term ‘identity’ was typically used as a rhetorical substitute for references to substantive culture or character.

Strategies of objectification and anchoring

Rather than reify the construct of Britishness through allusions to a common and enduring national character or culture, Vaz and Cook used three alternative rhetorical strategies by which to render images of a polycultural British society, and multiculturalism as a socio-political process, concrete and visible.

First, both Vaz and Cook regularly slipped between the language of polity and the idiom of geography, re-presenting ‘British society’ in non-social terms, as ‘the island/s’ (cf. Abell et al., 2006). For example, Vaz (see extract 13, below), elided the constructs of ‘*British society*’ and ‘*island status*’, and Cook (see extract 9, above) employed anthropomorphic imagery to attribute enduring historical experience not to the British people but British territory: ‘*The diversity of modern Britain expressed through devolution and multiculturalism is more consistent with the historical experience of our islands*’⁵.

The second strategy used in both speeches involved objectifying the construct of ‘culture/s’ through culinary imagery. The capacity for abstract constructs and values to be conveyed through images of food has been documented in other contexts

⁵ Vaz’s use of the singular ‘island’ and Cook’s use of the plural ‘islands’ parallels differences in formulation in England and Scotland noted by Abell et al (2006). The complexities and contradictions which run through political arguments are also evidenced at the more basic level of lexical choice: the singular ‘island’ may be regarded as problematic since it omits part of the territory of the UK state. On the other hand, the plural ‘our islands’ may be regarded as overly-inclusive, in so far as it is often used by people in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland as a reference to the geographical region of the British Isles *as opposed to* the territory of the UK state. Note also how the BNP – who generally espouse an ideology of national integrity and support policies of intra-UK national self-governance – also use the plural form of ‘these islands’ (see extracts 17 and 18).

(e.g. Jovchelovitch & Gervais, 1999), as has the specific use of culinary imagery in the context of accounts of British multiculturalism (Cook, Crang, & Thorpe, 1999). In extract 1, we saw Keith Vaz argue in favour of a racially and culturally inclusive version of Britishness. In the course of working up this account, Vaz switched from using the term ‘British’ as a social or political referent (a ‘*society*’ of ‘*citizens*’) to relaying images of cultural pluralism through references to food:

Extract 11

KV

3 For some, it is a narrow
4 term suggesting white, English and Empire – thus excluding millions of
5 British citizens. For others, it conveys a much wider range of images
6 reflecting the whole of our society – not just fish and chips, but also sweet
7 and sour pork and chicken tikka masala. In fact, the last dish was
8 actually invented in Britain by Indian restaurateurs, but I digress!

Two months later Cook took up Vaz’s ‘digressive’ narrative concerning chicken tikka masala and raised it to exemplificatory status⁶:

Extract 12

RC

1 Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British national dish, not
2 only because it is the most popular, but because it is a perfect
3 illustration of the way Britain absorbs and adapts external
4 influences. Chicken Tikka is an Indian dish. The Masala sauce
5 was added to satisfy the desire of British people to have their meat
6 served in gravy.

The third strategy involved the use of a highly conventionalised (cf. Bartlett, 1932) form of historiography as an anchoring device for accounts of contemporary British multiculturalism. Anglo British historiography tends not to employ foundation myths, but rather involves a narrative of successive ‘waves’ of foreign invasion and settlement (Condor, in press). Both Vaz and Cook used this form of historical

⁶ Somewhat parenthetically, we may note that this example reminds us of the potential dangers inherent in assuming that ‘the media’ speak with a singular voice (cf. Moscovici, 1976). In the present case, Vaz’s original reference to chicken tikka masala appears to have been simply ignored by the news media. Cook’s recycling of chicken tikka as a metaphor for British cultural hybridity, on the other hand, was widely reported – and generally ridiculed - in the media in England. In Scotland, media emphasis was more inclined to be placed on the question of whether chicken tikka masala could be claimed as a distinctively Scottish invention (Rosie et al., 2004).

representation to normalise post-colonial immigration. In extract 13, Vaz describes the ongoing process by which ‘British society’ (unlike that of his Austrian hosts) developed into a ‘*nation of island people from diverse origins*’ (lines 3-4):

Extract 13

KV 1 British society, on the other hand, has been deeply marked by its island
 2 status of four nations and its history of an overseas rather than a
 3 continental empire. It has always been a nation of island people from
 4 diverse origins - by 1066, when we were invaded for the last time by the
 5 Normans, we had already been subject to invasion and settlement by the
 6 Romans, Angles, Saxons, Danes, Vikings, and Norse. Immigrants arrived in
 7 significant numbers from Europe during the late 19th century and in the
 8 first half of the last century. And after the war, we encouraged immigration
 9 to Britain from our colonies and former colonies to help rebuild our
 10 shattered economy. The first group of Jamaicans arrived in 1948 and were
 11 followed by tens of thousands more, from the Caribbean, India, Pakistan
 12 and Bangladesh. The 70s and 80s also saw the arrival of the Hong Kong
 13 Chinese and refugees from Vietnam.

Robin Cook also used this trope when he represented the present condition of racial heterogeneity and cultural pluralism as the most recent stage in the open-ended evolution of British identity, whereby people of ‘*countless different races and communities*’ came to ‘*gather*’ in ‘*these islands*’:

Extract 14

RC 1 The first element in the debate about the future of Britishness is
 2 the changing ethnic composition of the British people themselves.
 3 The British are not a race, but a gathering of countless different
 4 races and communities, the vast majority of which were not
 5 indigenous to these islands.

Later in his speech, he extemporised upon this theme:

Extract 15

RC 1 London was first established as the capital of a Celtic Britain by Romans
 2 from Italy. They were in turn driven out by Saxons and Angles from
 3 Germany. The great cathedrals of this land were built mostly by Norman
 4 Bishops, but the religion practised in them was secured by the succession
 5 of a Dutch Prince. Outside our Parliament, Richard the Lionheart proudly
 6 sits astride his steed. A symbol of British courage and defiance. Yet he
 7 spoke French much of his life and depended on the Jewish community of
 8 England to put up the ransom that freed him from prison.

The implicit attribution of intra-national racial and cultural diversity to the process of transnational immigration, evident in both of these speeches (see also extracts 7 and 8), has important ideological implications, which will be discussed presently.

The common-place status of the ‘waves of foreign influence’ repertoire

In the next section of this paper I shall be considering some of the tensions, oppositional themes and paradoxes that may be identified within these arguments in favour of non-racialized and culturally plural representations of British society. Before we move on, however, it is worth noting elements of consensus between arguments designed for very different political ends.

The notion of ‘consensus’ in social representations theory has, of course, been the subject of a good deal of dispute, with discursive psychologists in particular taking issue with what they understand either to be a claim to the effect that members of a particular group or society will simply *agree* in their understandings and evaluations of the social and physical world (e.g. Potter & Litton, 1985), or that representations will only be employed in the form of fixed and distinctive opinions, ‘in the sense that some people [will] *always* use a certain repertoire, and certain people another’ (Potter & Wetherell, 1987 p. 156). Taking issue with this kind of interpretation, Rose et al. (1995) emphasised that the term ‘consensual’ should be understood more loosely, as reference to a ‘representational field’ that provides social actors with a shared stock of symbolic resources and common grounds for debate. In this respect, the notion of a ‘consensual’ representation might be seen to be essentially compatible with Billig’s (1987; 1991) notion of ‘common-place’ aspects of argumentation, Potter & Wetherell’s (1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) construct of

shared ‘interpretative repertoires’, or ethnomethodological accounts of members of a collectivity orienting to shared ‘common-sense’ (e.g. Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970).

Previous work in social psychology has questioned whether people espousing different political views on matters of ‘race relations’ and multiculturalism will necessarily draw on different rhetorical and ideological resources. Rather, research has pointed to the ways in which the same basic values and propositions (albeit possibly understood in slightly different ways) may be used to construct both racist and anti-racist arguments (Verkuyten de Jong & Masson, 1994). In the case of the speeches considered here, we may note that although both Vaz and Cook relied heavily on the narrative device of progressive waves of foreign influence to undermine claims concerning the ethnic basis of British identity and to naturalise the status of contemporary Britain as a ‘multi-cultural society’, precisely the same form of historical imagery is currently employed by the far right British National Party (BNP) for very different rhetorical ends. The kinds of representation favoured by the BNP might be seen to epitomise precisely the ‘point of view’ that Vaz and Cook were resisting, in so far as they endorse an explicitly racial version of nationality and citizenship, as reflected in the following quotation from a speech (entitled ‘the Reality of Race’) presented by Nick Griffin, BNP chairman, published ahead of the UK local elections in 2003:

Extract 16

1 Mankind is divided into races, and those races, while sharing many common
2 features of humanity, are innately different in many ways beyond mere colour.
3 [...] The most important first consequence of our acceptance of innate human
4 differences is our recognition that nationality, while it is influenced by many
5 factors including shared loyalties, common history, religious heritage and
6 personal identification is first and foremost decided by ethnicity.

It is interesting to note that the commonsensical nature of the narrative of ‘waves of foreign influence’ is such that even BNP spokespeople are unable to presume the

existence of ‘indigenous’ or ‘native’ British peoples as a primordial folk. Rather, in order to construct a category of persons rightfully belonging to the territorial area currently occupied by the UK state (or any of its constituent nations), the BNP substitute references to historical *origins* of the British people, with a notion of ‘deep’ historical *legacy* combined with a notion of Caucasian⁷ Western Europeans as ‘*kindred peoples*’ (extract 17, line 7) of ‘*almost identical stock*’ (extract 18, line 7):

Extract 17

1 The British National Party exists to secure a future for the
2 indigenous peoples of these islands in the North Atlantic which have
3 been our homeland for millennia. We use the term indigenous to
4 describe the people whose ancestors were the earliest settlers here
5 after the last great Ice Age and which have been complemented by the historic
6 migrations from mainland Europe. The migrations of the Celts, Anglo-Saxons,
7 Danes, Norse and closely related kindred peoples have been, over the past few
8 thousands years, instrumental in defining the character of our family of nations.

BNP Mission Statement (<http://www.bnp.org.uk/mission.htm>).

Extract 18

1 Q: When you talk about being "British" what do you mean?
2 A: We mean the bonds of culture, race, identity and roots of the native British
3 peoples of the British Isles. We have lived in these islands near on 40,000 years!
4 We were made by these islands, and these islands are our home. When we in the
5 BNP talk about being British, we talk about the native peoples who have lived in
6 these islands since before the Stone Age, and the relatively small numbers of
7 peoples of almost identical stock, such as the Saxons, Vikings and Normans, and
8 the Irish, who have come here and assimilated.

BNP website FAQs (<http://www.bnp.org.uk>).

The presumption that British culture in general, and British democratic values⁸ in particular, represent the distinctive historical product of ‘*the peoples of Western*

⁷ The fact that the ‘kindred’ nature of the Celts, Anglo-Saxons, Danes, Norse, Romans and Normans pertains to their common racial ‘stock’ is spelled out in an article which clarifies the claim that the indigenous British constitute a collectivity of Caucasian peoples originating in Northern and Western Europe. See http://www.bnp.org.uk/articles/british_mongrel.htm

⁸ It is a common feature of discourse that eschews cultural nationalism to distinguish between the constructs of ‘culture’ and ‘political values’, the claim being that citizens may maintain different ways of life whilst nevertheless subscribing to the same political institutions (see extracts KV4 and RC5 for examples of Vaz and Cook treating ‘values’ as distinct from ‘culture’). In contrast, it may be noted how BNP commentators treat political values as indistinguishable from culture, and regard both as largely determined by race.

Europe' (extract 19, line 3) is used by the BNP as a basis for resisting further immigration by '*people from very different ethnic groups and cultures*' (extract 19, lines 9-10), on the grounds that these people have '*genetically pre-determined*' (extract 19, line 6) limitations to their ability to accommodate 'European' values of democratic citizenship:

Extract 19

1 Taking these facts into account, we believe that it is far more likely than not that
2 the historically established tendency (and we do not claim that it is any more than
3 that) of the peoples of Western Europe in general - and of these islands in
4 particular - to create and sustain social and political structures in which individual
5 freedom, equality before the law, private property and popular participation in
6 decision-making, is to some extent at least genetically pre-determined. Such
7 tendencies would, naturally, both shape our culture around such institutions, and
8 in turn tend to be reinforced by that culture.

9 If this is the case, then the idea that it is possible to allow large numbers of people
10 from very different ethnic groups and cultures to settle here, on the assumption
11 that it is just something about our bracing sea air that tends to make us natural
12 born democrats, is fatally flawed. Just as is the idea that we can export our
13 enthusiasm for representative government to other peoples, either by example or
14 by carpet-bombing their countries into giving up their penchant for strong
15 government or theocracy.

16 Hence, in order to guarantee the continued existence of our British democracy, we
17 also intend to take long-term steps to guarantee the continued existence, as the
18 clearly dominant ethnic, cultural and political group, of the native peoples of these
19 islands - the English, Scots, Irish and Welsh - together with the limited numbers
20 of peoples of European descent, who arrived as refugees or economic immigrants
21 centuries or decades ago, and who have fully integrated into our society.

(From: *Rebuilding British Democracy*, BNP General Election Manifesto, 2005).

Reproducing the myth of ethnic nationalism

In this section of the paper I turn to consider some paradoxical aspects of Vaz's and Cook's accounts of Britain as a post-Imperial multicultural society and polity, and of their representation of multiculturalism as the antithesis of 'insular nationalism'. First, I consider how the specific arguments that Vaz and Cook mobilise to challenge mono-racial and mono-cultural constructions of British identity rely at base on a tacit presumption of a natural order of ethno-cultural nationhood. Second, I note how both speakers implicitly adopt a circumscribed understanding of their moral universe as pertaining simply to the UK. Third, I note how their resistance to racialization and their advocacy of multiculturalism in the domestic arena is articulated in conjunction with a form of subtle xenophobia, by virtue of which ethnic diversity is presented as a distinctively British virtue, and as a form of human capital that provides the UK with a competitive advantage over other nations and states. Finally, I note how these supposedly post-colonial re-formulations of British society as composed of diverse peoples inhabiting an enduring territory ('the island'), whose distinctive history and geographical location makes them especially disinclined towards insularity, and who enjoy the material, aesthetic and moral advantages of a multi-racial, multicultural polity, paradoxically echo the very discursive formations of Anglo British identity and imperial governance which the speakers claim to be supplanting.

Presupposing a global order of ethnic nationhood

In the course of resisting ethno-cultural representations of British society, neither Vaz nor Cook questioned the presumption that nations in general are normally

populated by an original, singular and distinctive folk. The closest that either of these speakers comes to rejecting ethno-cultural nationalism as a general ideological principle is when Cook (extract 7) casts the USA and Canada as examples of ‘modern’ nations. This one exception aside, the rhetorical devices that Vaz and Cook used to promote the fact and value of British multiculturalism actually presupposed a natural order in which nations are populated by an original folk possessing a common ancestral heritage and a homogeneous and distinctive culture. In fact, their claims concerning the importance of non-ethnic understandings of nationhood for the ‘modern world’ implicitly presuppose a ‘pre-modern world’ for which ethnic formulations would have been appropriate.

In addition, we may note how the attribution of intra-national and intra-state racial and cultural pluralism to ‘*external influence*’ (extract 20 line 3) in general, and to trans-national immigration in particular, implicitly excludes consideration of indigenous cultural heterogeneity within the territories of extant or historically emergent nations or states. Neither Cook nor Vaz entertained the possibility that the inhabitants of the British Isles (or, in extract 7, of Canada or the USA) might have been characterised by ethnic diversity before the waves of ‘foreigners’ arrived at the shores. Similarly, they did not entertain the possibility that the peoples that they cite as cultural brokers (Saxons, Danes, Vikings, Norse etc.) might themselves have been characterised by various, or hybrid, cultural forms. Finally, the presumption that different cultures were originally the property of distinctive *national* peoples inhabiting *national* territories is apparent in the anachronistic application of contemporary frames of geopolitical reference, whereby imperial Rome is located in ‘Italy’, and the Angles are said to hail from ‘Germany’ (extract 15).

British multiculturalism and subtle xenophobia

We have seen how both Cook and Vaz suggested that anti-racism and multiculturalism necessarily entail a commitment to internationalism and vice versa, thereby presenting themselves (and the party and government they represented) as inhabiting what Billig (1995 p. 49) termed a ‘reasonable world of point-zero nationalism’. However, as Billig (1995) cogently noted, the construct of internationalism in fact presupposes a world which is ultimately decomposable into essentially and eternally separate national categories. In practice, the wider world in which Vaz and Cook located the UK was not a world of universal humanity, nor a cosmopolitan world of trans-national cultures, nor again a global ‘network’ through which flows of people, capital, ideologies, practices, artefacts or cultural formations may be charted (cf. Urry, 2000). Rather, both speakers represented Britain as a coherent and bounded nation/state within a world in which economies, societies, virtues, interests and (normally) races and cultures, all come neatly and unambiguously packaged in national (or state) categories. Their arguments in favour of UK multiculturalism did not challenge what Billig has identified as the hegemonic status of nationalism as an ‘international ideology’. On the contrary, their arguments actually promoted the value of British exceptionalism, and promoted the UK’s particular economic and military interests in direct contrast to those of other nations and states.

(i) Ethnic diversity and British exceptionalism

As we noted above, the arguments that Cook and Vaz formulated in favour of the poly-ethnic character of British society did not rest on claims to the effect that the ideology of ethnic nationalism *per se* is based on false premises. On the contrary, the

crux of these arguments was that ideologies of cultural and racial purity are false specifically *of Britain*:

Extract 20

RC 1 In the pre-industrial era, when transport and communications were
 2 often easier by sea than by land, Britain was unusually open to
 3 external influence; first through foreign invasion, then, after Britain
 4 achieved naval supremacy, through commerce and imperial
 5 expansion. It is not their purity that makes the British unique, but
 6 the sheer pluralism of their ancestry.

This extract is particularly interesting in view of the fact that Cook had earlier justified the UK's membership of the EU on the grounds of the existence of a common 'European identity' based on shared geography and history:

Extract 21

RC 1 To deny that Britain is European is to deny both our geography and our
 2 history. Our culture, our security, and our prosperity, are inseparable
 3 from the continent of Europe.

In extract 20, however, the idea that 'Britain' (here equated with the territory of the contemporary UK state) had, in the past, been '*uniquely open to external influence*' involves a sense of absolute geographical distinctiveness, together with a strategic bracketing of historical population flows throughout Europe as well as elsewhere across the globe (see extract 22 below, for a similar account from Vaz's speech). Similarly, in extract 13, we may note how Keith Vaz neglects to consider the non-continental imperial histories of the Dutch, Spanish and Portuguese, and overlooks the Roman occupation of any other European (or, for that matter, Asian and African) territories. In contrast, the BNP's explicitly racialized version of British identity is paradoxically more able to accommodate imagery of a pan-European experience based on a common geographical location and a common history.

More generally, we may note that far from entailing the antithesis of 'insular nationalism', Vaz and Cook's arguments against racially or culturally delimited

understandings of social inclusion were strictly delimited in their domain of application to the population of the UK. Consequently, when Vaz described to his audience in Vienna how ‘*diversity enriches our society and our lives*’ he was using ‘our’ in an addressee-exclusive way, to pertain specifically to Britain. Similarly, when Cook described multiculturalism as ‘*a positive force for our economy and society*’ (extract 3), the pronominal ‘our’ and the nominal ‘economy’ and ‘society’ did not refer to a generic category of humanity, or even to an imagined community of EU citizens, but to ‘our’ specifically *British* economy and society. And when Cook referred to the value of cultural pluralism for ‘*our prosperity, our security*’ (extract 5) this did not refer to ‘our’ global welfare, but specifically to the welfare of *British* residents or citizens. If we refer back to extract 5, we can see that Cook completed his three part list (cf. Jefferson, 1990) with a reference to ‘*our influence*’, and constructed the relationship between the British citizenry and global humanity in terms of an ‘us’ versus ‘them’ distinction (‘*our relations with other peoples around the globe*’) in such a manner as to treat the rest of the world as a potential threat or resource rather than a category of common identity or interest⁹.

(ii) Multiculturalism as a British resource and virtue

Cook and Vaz did not simply restrict their moral and pragmatic concerns to the welfare of population of the UK. In addition, their arguments in favour of multiculturalism involved an imaginary international hierarchy - an ‘order of nations’ (cf. Spurr, 2001) - in which the existence of ethnic diversity and political support for cultural pluralism in the UK was treated as evidence for ‘our’ distinctively advanced stage of politico-moral development and level of rational governance. Keith Vaz was

⁹ The representation of emergent global events and processes as constraints and opportunities for specifically British interests and policies is common to New Labour rhetoric (Smith, 2000).

addressing an audience in Vienna, and at the start of his speech he displayed a tactful concern to respect the different approaches adopted towards national integration adopted by governments in Austria and the UK:

Extract 22

KV 1 Austria’s approach to multiculturalism, given our different histories and
 2 geographical positions, is different from ours. You tend to focus more on
 3 integration in the sense of assimilation. But it would be strange if we
 4 viewed these issues in the same way.

Although Vaz attempted to deflect potential charges of ethnocentrism by casting ideological differences between the UK and Austria as natural and inevitable (*‘it would be strange if we viewed these issues in the same way’*, lines 3-4), at the same time he made it clear that the (multiculturalist) values he attributed to the British government are ultimately morally superior to those (assimilationist) policies he attributed to the Austrian government: in extract 10 we saw Vaz treating ‘fairness’ as necessarily entailing government policy that *‘not just assimilates people but celebrates people’s differences.’* Consequently, to paraphrase a formulation from Meertens & Pettigrew (1997 p. 56), whilst Vaz did not treat the Austrian approach to national integration as inferior to the British approach, he presented the British approach as superior to the Austrian.

Cook, who was addressing a domestic audience, cast cultural pluralism not simply as a matter of ‘our’ superior moral virtue, but also as a resource in an essentially competitive international arena: *‘an immense asset [for] ...our nation’*, and he enjoined his audience to appreciate the extent to which the existence of (by implication distinctive) ethnic diversity enhances the human capital of the Capital, such that London may be represented as the *‘hub of the globe’*:

Extract 23

RC 1 Today’s London is a perfect hub of the globe. It is home to over 30 ethnic
 2 communities of at least 10,000 residents each. In this city tonight, over
 3 300 languages will be spoken by families over their evening meal at home.

4 This pluralism is not a burden we must reluctantly accept. It is an immense
5 asset that contributes to the cultural and economic vitality
6 of our nation.

In addition, we may note how Vaz and Cook presented anti-racism, multiculturalism, internationalism and even democracy not as generic human values, but as specifically and distinctively British virtues: Vaz, for example, described ‘*respect for human rights*’, ‘*tolerance*’, ‘*fair play*’ and ‘*an outward approach to the world*’ as ‘*core British values*’ (see extract 4). Again, it is interesting to note how the BNP version – in which respect for human rights, tolerance, fair play and so forth are attributed to the genetic propensity of Western European Caucasians – is paradoxically more open to the possibility that democratic values may not reflect uniquely *British* virtues.

Echoes of Empire

As Moscovici (1981 p. 191) has noted, social representations create a ‘reassuring impression of something we have “seen before” and “known before”’. What Cook and Vaz both left unacknowledged is the extent to which their supposedly novel forms re-presentation actually directly echoed (cf. Moscovici, 1984 p. 950) the dominant discursive tropes of Anglo British imperial governance. In fact, far from representing a distinctively post-colonial reformulation of nationhood and of British identity, parallel forms of representation may be identified quite readily in didactic texts produced for the British public from the Victorian era of Imperial expansion until the Second World War.

(i) The trope of Anglo/British diversity and hybridity

I noted above how Vaz and Cook – in common with many contemporary cultural commentators – treated presumptions of British monoculture as part of an

ideological package which also included Anglocentrism. It is, then, instructive to note how the ‘waves of foreign influence’ repertoire that these speakers used to naturalise ‘British’ polyculture in practice involved the adoption of an effectively Anglocentric historical narrative. Both Cook and Vaz tacitly took 1066 (the date of the Norman conquest of *England*) as the canonical historical landmark in the history of ‘Britain’. Cook, for example, referred to ‘*our thousand years of history*’ (extract 12), and Vaz referred explicitly to ‘*1066, when we [sic] were invaded for the last time by the Normans*’ (extract 13). Both Vaz and Cook universalised the experience of the Norman Conquest (of England), the rule of King Richard (of England), and the Roman occupation (of Britannia Major, but not of Caledonia). In contrast, it is instructive to note how the BNP version of the history of ‘*our family of nations*’ (reported in extract 17) studiously avoids this form of implicitly Anglocentric accounting.

It is also worth noting that the narrative of the gradual evolution of the Anglo British as an amalgam of different peoples and cultures that Vaz and Cook employ does not represent a novel, post-colonial, form of historiography (Todd, 1994). In the past, this kind of representation has been apparent in the formulation of the English as a ‘mongrel race’, or, in Defoe’s (1703) words, ‘That het’rogeous thing, an Englishman’. Far from constituting a distinctively twenty-first century form of representation, images of the Anglo British as an historical hybrid of different peoples was regularly employed in nineteenth century history texts produced for children, such as Dickens’s (1853) *A Child’s History of England*:

Little by little, strangers became mixed with the Islanders, and the savage Britons grew into a wild, bold people (p.8).

This kind of formulation could be used to support a range of rhetorical projects. Defoe himself used references to the ‘het’rogeous’ heritage of the

population of England to parody contemporary forms of anti-French sentiment based on appeals to a supposedly distinctive and enduring English national character. In the nineteenth century this representation of national diversity and hybridity was used to positively differentiate England and the English from nations whose claims to identity emphasized the existence of cultural homogeneity (as was emerging in France) or a common genetic ‘stock’ (as was emerging in Germany) (Young, 1995).

In the first half of the twentieth century, images of Anglo/British ancestral and cultural diversity and hybridity were still current. The example below, taken from Dixon’s book *The Englishman* published in 1938, has evident parallels with the kind of account presented above (e.g. extract 20) in which contemporary politicians celebrate the uniquely plural ancestry of the population of the UK:

The island, the geographical unit, bound its inhabitants together, made of the various tribes a common people, a group, a community, and finally a nation, living and working together to common ends. This, then, is England’s peculiarity, a firm island unity imposed upon and embracing the most extreme racial variety anywhere to be found within such limits in all the world. (p. 101).

By the nineteen thirties, this type of representation was not being used simply as a basis from which to cast Anglo British national chauvinism as fundamentally irrational, nor to present ‘our’ nation as superior to others (although such arguments were still current). Significantly, in the run-up to the second world war, arguments concerning the racial and cultural diversity of contemporary nations was also inclined to be granted a quasi-universal status, in a manner which contrasts markedly with their use by Vaz and by Cook at the start of the twenty-first century. Although contemporary authors pointed to the ‘peculiarity’ of the Anglo British condition of cultural hybridity and diversity, the difference between ‘our’ country and others could be treated as one of degree rather than kind. For example, Dixon, also noted that:

'The peoples and races we know, the inhabitants of the world today, are without exception, mixed races and peoples' (p. 19)

Unlike Vaz and Cook, Dixon specifically emphasised how the especial diversity of 'England and the English' represented part and parcel of a more generic, pan-European, condition:

'Overlook this ethnic complex and we shall certainly be at a loss to understand England and the English. "It has been said of Europe in general, and particularly of Western Europe, that it constituted a cul-de-sac, in which masses of immigrants succeeded or were heaped upon each other." So with our own country' (p. 88)

In addition, unlike Vaz and Cook, Dixon also suggested that the Angles and Saxons were not an ethnically singular or indigenous people.

This is not, of course, to say that Dixon's accounts of the fictive nature of all appeals to ethnic nationalism was devoid of connotations of Anglo British chauvinism. On the contrary the very act of flagging an awareness of the racially and culturally diverse heritages of national populations was clearly designed to display the comparative moral and intellectual superiority of Anglo British national consciousness over the irredentist politics of Nazi Germany.

(ii) Diversity and tolerance as positive autostereotypes of British Imperial Polity

In extracts 1 and 11, Keith Vaz presented Imperial constructions of British identity as comparatively 'narrow', and as racially and culturally exclusive. Although this kind of representation is commonly found in lay historiography (Condor, in press), Imperial Britain was in fact typically valorised as a multi-racial and multi-cultural as well as a multi-national, polity. In fact, it is only since the break-up of the Empire (and the substitution of the legal status of British *imperial subject* with that of

British *state citizen*) that increasingly restrictive bureaucratic criteria of membership have come to be formulated and applied.

Favell (1998) has noted how concerns on the part of successive UK governments over the economic and moral value of a racially and culturally neutral understanding of Britishness within the domestic sphere may be traced directly to the distinctive strategies of British Imperial governance, and in particular the policy of ‘indirect rule’ whereby colonial governance was effected by bolstering indigenous cultures and supporting indigenous rulers. A good deal of the self-celebratory rhetoric of British Imperialism in fact emphasised the moral, aesthetic, economic and military advantages of a multi-racial polity characterised by seeming infinite cultural variety (Cannadine, 2001). Examples of the valorisation of the racial and cultural diversity of the Empire’s subjects may readily be identified in didactic texts, as illustrated by the following extract from Newland & Donald’s (1923) school primer,

The Model Citizen:

The British Empire is one of the marvels of the world [...] a dominion composed of widely scattered parts, separated by [...] differences of religion, customs, traditions, race, and colour; and yet united under one king, one flag, and one empire. This vast domain, more than eleven millions of square miles in extent, has been built up by the pluck, enterprise, and tact of our forefathers, and it has been handed down to us as a heritage of which we are rightly proud’ (p. 185).

Note how, like Robin Cook in extract 5, Newland and Donald attribute the existence of the Empire as a successful multi-racial, multi-cultural community to enduring British values (although unlike Cook they are prepared to specify these as ‘pluck’, ‘enterprise’ and ‘tact’).

We have seen how Robin Cook in 2001 used references to statistical facts to emphasise the extent and distinctiveness of UK ethnic diversity. Similarly, the cultural and racial diversity of the populations of British Imperial possessions was frequently calibrated for rhetorical effect. The following extract from Cooper’s (1921)

text for children, *How the Empire Grew*, is notably similar to Robin Cook's

metropolitan version quoted above in extract 23:

In this empire of ours these are nearly as many blacks as there are whites, and three times as many browns ... the British empire includes as many Chinese as there are in Peking, and six times as many Arabs as there are in all Arabia (p. 132).

I noted above how Keith Vaz implicitly treated UK government policies of multiculturalism as superior to the strategies of social integration used in many other EU member states, which 'just assimilat[e] people'. It is interesting, then, to note that during the age of Imperialism, authors regularly asserted the superiority of the British policy of 'indirect rule' as compared to the French Imperial policy that involved the cultural assimilation of subject peoples. In the following extract, Newland and Donald (1923, p. 205) emphasise this point by stressing how British subjects of French origin benefited from the comparatively 'liberal' form of British imperial governance:

When the English conquered Quebec, they did not inflict indignity upon the vanquished people by imposing upon them another language and another religion. They not only left the French all the liberty which they had previously enjoyed, but gave them more.

I noted above how contemporary politicians may shroud their celebratory accounts of the superiority of the form of citizenship adopted in the UK beneath a tactful recognition of national differences (see extract 22 above). Similarly, Newland and Donald (p. 238) encouraged their young readers to display the British virtue of tact when faced with alternative forms of citizenship characteristic of less fortunate or enlightened foreigners:

There are people in every land who love freedom and justice, who have their citizen rights and perform their citizen duties, although such rights and duties may not be so many or quite the same as ours. We should always remember, then, to do justice to foreigners, as we should like them to do justice to us.

Concluding comments

In this paper I have been arguing that in so far as we are concerned to resist processes of racialization, we need to appreciate the complex ways in which mediated representations of race and culture come to be articulated in conjunction with representations of nation and state. In order to illustrate this point, I took what might, at a superficial level, be regarded as a relatively ‘hard case’. In considering political speeches, I have been looking at forms of rhetoric which were not spontaneously-produced, had been informed by current social scientific thinking, and had almost certainly been crafted and edited with a view to ensuring their logical coherence and internal consistency. In addition, rather than focussing on forms of talk which we would conventionally be inclined to view as ‘racist discourse’ (within which contradictions have regularly been noted, e.g. Wetherell & Potter, 1992), I considered polemical rhetoric designed precisely to *resist* ethno-cultural representations of British identity, society and polity. For social psychologists resident in the UK, it is quite likely that the kinds of arguments presented by Keith Vaz and Robin Cook would be accepted in general (if not necessarily on all points of detail) as representations that are not only ‘of us’, and ‘for us’, but also ‘like ours’. Consequently, one objective of this paper was to stimulate critical reflexivity on the part of social representations researchers, and to inoculate against the comfortable presumption that whereas ‘other’ people’s representations of the social and political world may be characterised by incoherence, tension and ambivalence, ‘ours’ are necessarily characterised by a simple rational integrity (see Ashmore, 1989; Condor, 1997b, for similar arguments in relation to discourse analytic perspectives on variability).

In particular, my analysis has focussed the inherent limitations of those attempts to resist racialized representations ‘of us’ and ‘for us’, which tacitly limit the ‘us’-category to the population (or citizenry) of a particular nation or state. In this respect, we must bear in mind that many of the apparently generic terms that we use routinely – including that slippery term ‘society’ and apparently innocuous referents like ‘people’ - often implicitly presuppose a nationally-circumscribed frame of reference. To return to the specific topic of this conference, we may note that the constructs of ‘*social* representations’ and ‘*the* media’ rarely in practice refer to a phenomenon or agent understood to traverse national boundaries (although see Rosie et al., 2004). Unless we become alert to the ways in which concerns over ‘social exclusion’ on the basis of race or ethnicity routinely operate through an implicitly *nationalized* understanding of the ultimate possibilities for ‘social inclusion’, we may – like Keith Vaz and Robin Cook - paradoxically end up subtly reproducing similar forms of particularistic representational practice to those that we were intending to resist.

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